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PROVISION FOR ACCELERANT AND RETARDED CHILDREN IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

FRANK P. WHITNEY

Collinwood Junior High School, Cleveland, Ohio

It appears that the advantages of grouping children according to ability for purposes of instruction decidedly outweigh any disadvantages inherent in the scheme. For the purpose of this discussion I assume that all are agreed on this general proposition. Possibly any lingering suspicion on this score might be removed by substituting the expression "mental differences" for "ability." Grouping children according to their differences for purposes of instruction is but another way of saying that we must have some sort of grading in our schools in order to get anywhere. These differences may be differences of age, of sex, of purpose or choice, of mental ability, as well as differences in the stage of advancement in proficiency of some kind. The whole scheme of grading pupils in school is based upon the assumption that it is possible to determine their relative or absolute capacity or ability or aptitude for carrying on certain lines of work. I am therefore assuming at the outset that it is desirable to grade children according to ability. The question is not *whether* but *how* it should be done.

The introduction of the junior high school into the educational system has created a unique opportunity. It has brought together large numbers of children in the seventh and eighth school years who, for the most part, are taking common subjects in which the standards of accomplishment are still somewhat elastic. We are therefore presented with the opportunity, not only of grouping children according to ability, but also of setting varying standards of accomplish-

ment for the different groups. To my mind this situation requires us to readjust our traditional views as well as our school organization in somewhat radical ways.

Preliminary to suggesting one or two of the definite readjustments which seem to be needed, I may state two presuppositions in mind in attacking this problem:

1. The course of study should be exactly suited to the ability or capacity of the pupils. I mean here by the course of study not merely the printed course, or that outlined by supervisors and superintendent, but the one actually administered and taught. It is, of course, the theory that all courses of study are fitted to the pupils. It is not the practice actually to fit them to the pupils. The facts as to retardation conclusively prove this statement. Again, by ability or capacity I mean, not a theoretical ability or capacity that someone may assume that children ought to have, but the ability or capacity that actually gets on the job and performs. This interpretation, for example, takes into account in determining working ability the certain proportion of absence due to unavoidable causes such as illness. This, of course, cannot be done in any individual case, but it can be done with mathematical certainty for fairly large groups.

2. The ideal school for which courses of study, buildings, equipment, and teachers exist is, whatever else it may be, one where every pupil is busy, happy, interested, and successful. That school is failing of its purpose that allows any considerable proportion of its pupils to develop the habit of failure. Just to the extent to which a school or a teacher sets before pupils working ideals that are impossible of realization, just to that extent is such a school or teacher promoting disorder, unhappiness, discontent, and failure.

In a word, then, I am presupposing as a necessary condition to the success of this plan that teachers have sufficient freedom in giving assignments of work within the limits of the course

of study to permit children of any grade of ability to work happily and to achieve success.

The first readjustment I would propose would be such a change in method of promotion as would provide, not only for eliminating the slowest members of any group, but also for eliminating the most able members. Our common practice tends to keep the actual requirements of the course of study far in advance of the average ability of any particular group or class. It must be made as easy for children of marked ability to get ahead of their group as for children of low ability to get behind. In general, for every grade indicating marked deficiency given in any subject or course there must be a grade indicating marked proficiency. If the first grade means dropping into a slower section or even into a lower class, the second grade must mean going ahead into a more rapid section or into a higher class. This scheme provides an automatic check on the natural and inevitable tendency to overload the course of study in the interest of the brighter pupils. And this check will operate, not at the sacrifice, but to the advantage of that interest which certainly is in every way just as precious as the interest of the dullards. For every retardation there will somewhere be a corresponding acceleration. We shall never eliminate failures or individual retardation, but the retardation of large groups must be eliminated if we are to keep our schools true to the ideal of democracy—equal opportunity for all. The only natural, practicable, and certain means of preventing general retardation lies in providing some such automatic plan whereby acceleration is provided just to the extent to which retardation occurs.

The second readjustment has already been tacitly assumed. It involves our traditional point of view as to what a grade or mark in school signifies. If we have organized our school into classes on a general basis of advancement in proficiency, and each class into groups on a general basis of ability to do

the general work assigned to that class, we are then confronted with the problem of adjusting the demands of the course of study upon each of these groups so that each group somewhere within the maximum and minimum assignments may work happily, interestedly, and successfully. That is to say that each teacher upon whom primarily the problem falls must so vary the assignments of work for these various groups that it becomes genuinely possible for one group, even the poorest, to work as happily and as successfully as any other, even the best group.

Now it is obviously idle for us to talk about these poorest pupils being as successful as the best if we are to measure their success by the same standard. If we are actually to promote any such feeling of success as we desire, we must discard all thought of uniform standards of accomplishment. In other words the success of any group will be measured, not by the accomplishment of another group or by some absolute standard, but by their own success in performing the work assigned. This means that an excellent grade in one group does not of necessity signify on any absolute standard what the same grade in any other group signifies. It may signify more or less. For a pupil to win such a grade in one group does not afford a guaranty that he could win that grade in some other group. But a high grade anywhere does signify that the work assigned for that group has been well done. To that extent, alone, does a uniform and invariable meaning attach to the marks.

To any of us long accustomed to regarding a mark as given for the purpose of fixing a pupil's relative position upon some so-called absolute scale, it comes somewhat as a shock to be told that marks are to be used in so relative and varying a fashion. It looks like scholastic chaos. In reality it is not such a revolution in fact as it may seem in theory. At a teachers' meeting in my building some time ago, I asked what

the grades on the report cards signified in the minds of the teachers. The teachers themselves gave not less than six clearly defined and distinctly different meanings which could be, and actually were, attached in their own minds to these marks which they had just given. They were:

1. Proficiency on assigned work as indicated by either oral or written response or by the product turned out.

2. Some one or more of a group of social virtues such as response, willingness, co-operation, teachableness.

3. Power or capacity to understand and carry on present tasks.

4. Relative standing on any one or more of these points as compared with pupils either of this or some other group.

5. Standing on some absolute scale.

6. Probable ability to go on with new work of similar nature.

I have no doubt that anyone who took the trouble to inquire would meet a similar response showing the wide divergence in the interpretation that attaches to any particular mark. Probably it is altogether desirable that grades should at one time or another in some proportion or other carry all these meanings and perhaps still others. However, I mention this only to show that asking teachers to be just as willing and glad to give high grades in the poorest sections as in the best, provided that pupils qualify for them on the basis chiefly of the first interpretation given above, is not in truth a scheme either desperate or radical.

Certainly it ought to be possible for every pupil to work to his maximum and to have that work counted as being in the truest and highest sense successful. Some experience with this plan convinces me that, when properly handled, there is not the slightest danger that pupils will undervalue the privilege of working with a more able or rapid group, or that they will fail to distinguish between a high grade won in the poorest

section and a high grade won in the best section. If at any time it appears to be necessary, the mark can carry with it on the permanent record for identification purposes a subnumeral to indicate in what section it was earned. So far we have found that neither necessary nor desirable.

While this method of marking pupils may not be essential to a plan for providing rapid promotion for accelerants, it has proved in three years of practice to be of very great value in adjusting the course of study to the needs and capacities of the pupils, which is primarily exactly what grouping children according to ability is designed to secure. The whole scheme is based upon the frankest possible recognition of the differences in children in sum total as well as in type of ability, and at the same time upon the right of every child to have a real chance at success.

It is not a scheme to bamboozle children or to delight their parents. It does not tend toward the elimination but rather toward the development of distinctions. It is not the aim to deceive children or parents by a progress that is apparent rather than real. There is not the slightest pretense that those who have finished a certain grade have had an equivalent training or that their accomplishments are equal. Under this plan everyone has a chance at real progress. But because some children cannot maintain a rate of progress equal to that of certain others they are not therefore denied the satisfaction of making a little real progress of their own and of being worthily recognized for it. To the criticism which this scheme sometimes evokes concerning our accommodating complaisance in accepting and rewarding poor work, we can only reply that we are not interested in "maintaining our standards" if by that is meant "fitting the children to an inflexible course of study."

In Collinwood Junior High School we group the incoming seventh B class by districts until we are sufficiently acquainted

with them and they with us to make a regrouping on the ability basis practicable and, from our point of view, desirable. We have tried grouping them according to the scholarship estimates submitted by their sixth-grade teachers, but on the whole we prefer our present plan. Simply keeping these children with former acquaintances and friends provides an easier introduction to the diversified program of the junior high school.

In the ninth grade there is a required differentiation in courses depending upon the type of senior high school selected—academic, technical, or commercial. In a general way this follows the differentiation already begun in the seventh A class. So far, however, we have not had a sufficient number of pupils in the ninth grade to make a further grouping on the ability basis practicable in each ninth-grade section. For this reason, many pupils have not profited in respect to saving time and getting ahead to the extent that theoretically should have been possible.

Of the six grades or classes, this leaves three, seventh A, eighth B, and eighth A, in which we have had a fair chance at trying out the plan. In these classes the sections are made up according to ability. At the close of each term a committee of teachers sits in conference for some hours over the regrouping of each class basing their judgment upon the marks assigned in the five main subjects. As everyone knows, the ability of any particular child is likely to run rather evenly throughout the traditional school subjects. A study of the variations as manifested by the marks, whether such variations represent eccentricities of the pupil or of the teacher, or whether they indicate genuine differences, is a most wholesome exercise which the principal would be unreasonably selfish in monopolizing. Where a mark indicates considerable variation, effort is made to place a child in an appropriate section in that subject.

Having secured in this way fairly homogeneous groups, it becomes necessary to fit the assignments of work to the various groups. Inasmuch as the course of study in Cleveland is designed to guide and direct rather than to prescribe, it is possible within the limits of the course to do this successfully. The slowest group will be assigned the minimum amount, and the type as well as the material of instruction will be varied according to the needs of the particular section. By varying the breadth and depth or intensity of the work rather than its extent, the theory that all sections of a class come out together at the end of a term, although some have done much more work than others, is found to work fairly well. This scheme permits of a regrouping at the end of a term and of frequent and easy transfers from one section to another within the term.

As a test of the success with which the grouping has been done, as well as of the skill which teachers show in assigning work suited to their sections, frequent studies are made of the distribution of grades. Marks are given every four weeks in large part to facilitate the adjustment of pupils to their work and of the work to the pupils. The D mark, in this city the deficient or failing grade, is always understood to mean need of prompt readjustment of some kind. Two successive Ds demand immediate attention. This may consist of special help of some kind or of transfer to another section, slower as a rule, or even in some cases to a lower class in that subject.

For every D, the lowest grade given, there must be an E, the highest grade, to balance it. There will be exceptions, of course, in many small groups where the normal curve of distribution does not obtain. But in general it must be true of a group that as many get ahead as fall behind. Otherwise the course of study obviously is making an excessive demand and must at once be modified. The presence of too many Ds, in other words, may mean readjustment of the assignment or of the teacher as well as of the pupil.

Those who receive Es are candidates for acceleration just as those who receive Ds are candidates for retardation. It is usually found desirable in putting on children to arrange their programs so that for a time they may take the work of an advanced section or class in addition to that of the one they are in. This has the obvious advantage of giving them a try-out in the higher grade of work without making it in the least embarrassing for them in case they give it up.

The greatest difficulty, of course, in working any plan, which, even in the slightest degree may be touched with novelty, lies in securing the willing and intelligent co-operation of the teachers, most of whom are either drawn from the traditional type of elementary school or are recently from college with the impress of high-school and college teaching methods fresh upon them. In both cases it is a part of their creed that thoroughness demands eliminations. They feel that they must testify to their high standards by giving low marks. The following is a typical distribution of marks made by such a teacher teaching for the first time in the junior high school. They are the grades given on one occasion to five sections of a class in seventh grade arithmetic. The five marks given are arranged in order beginning with the lowest as follows: 14 Ds, 93 Ps, 57 Fs, 26 Gs, and 5 Es. This happened to be a fairly good class, probably above the average. It did not occur to this teacher until her attention was called to it, that if she was unable to give, on the average, more than one top grade to each of these five sections in arithmetic something might be radically wrong with her assignments.

A comparison of the distribution of top and bottom marks in the leading academic subjects at two periods, one before and one after some attention and study had been given to this matter, is interesting and suggestive. The marks used for this purpose were those given at corresponding periods in successive terms.

THE SCHOOL REVIEW

SUBJECT	FIRST PERIOD		SECOND PERIOD	
	Ds	Es	Ds	Es
Mathematics	126	6	88	89
English	69	2	27	36
History	38	3	18	24
Science	58	23	26	36
Totals	291	34	159	185

The total number of marks given in mathematics and English in the first period was about 800 and in the second period about 900, in history and science, somewhat less.

The first distribution is characteristic of a traditional type of school where the assignments are really made for the brightest pupils and a constant process of elimination is going on at the lower end, thus insuring cumulative retardation. The second distribution does not of necessity indicate that more or better school work was being done although we hope that may have been the case. It does indicate that a more wholesome relation exists between the assignments and the normal ability of the children. It also affords the school principal an opportunity to begin a process of elimination at the upper end which may balance the elimination at the lower end, and thus, in time, effectually check the general tendency toward retardation in the entire group.

In grouping children of junior high-school age according to ability as indicated by the proficiency marks, nothing could be farther from our thought than to imply at any time that there is anything necessarily permanent in this classification. Everyone is aware that from one term to another children of this age may show the most astonishing variations in ability as evidenced by application and industry and general success in school. The plan has this merit at least that it provides for such variations. Under its operation a sudden access of interest and enthusiasm on the part of any child may speedily result in suitable recognition and promotion.

The extreme flexibility of the scheme, of course, makes certain difficulties, or, I should prefer to say, inconveniences. It not only provides for, but makes inevitable, a continual changing of individual programs. There is never a time when everything is settled. As a class progresses through the school the proportion of irregular programs constantly increases, and program-making becomes correspondingly difficult. The plan requires for its successful operation more sections than sometimes we have had. Each term a large proportion of the teaching staff is new and must be led as tactfully as possible in many cases to discard theories of the grading and promotion of pupils which, having long been cherished, are doubly dear. However, these are all difficulties or inconveniences to be met with in any type of organization adapted to junior high-school needs. The real inconvenience lies in not having the children all made after the same pattern.